

Five Keys to Helping Students Read Difficult Texts

“You may be surprised that many of your students are not adequate readers of the texts you assign. Many simply do not know how to approach a challenging informational text. You can suggest five things that can make a big difference to help them read your texts with facility and intellectual engagement. How nice to have students coming to class prepared and full of inquiry!”

What makes the most difference for students in their reading of challenging texts? Below are the five top strategies students wish they had known earlier in their college careers. (The sources and inspiration for these strategies are based on Isakson, *Learn More & Read Faster*.)

1. [Before Reading: Preview & Build Anticipation](#)
2. [Before Reading: Set Purpose](#)
3. [During Reading: Synthesize Along the Way](#)
4. [During Reading: Ask Questions](#)
5. [After Reading: Explain](#)

1. Before Reading: Preview & Build Anticipation — *T.H.I.E.V.E.S. with Snatches*. Previewing, looking over a text before reading it carefully, is considered a key strategy of effective readers. The three main functions of previewing are to see how a text is put together, to realize the content of what you will be learning and thereby build or bring to memory background knowledge about the topic, and to give you enough of the content to set valuable purposes for reading it more carefully. Building anticipation, a separate principle from previewing but often done at the same time, motivates you to become engaged and committed to reading an academic text. It takes reading out of the realm of going-through-the-motions and puts your mindset solidly in the realm of “I have much I want to learn from this and I want to.” [T.H.I.E.V.E.S. with Snatches](#) is one strategy for doing this, although there are others (see [Six Ways to Become Fascinated by a “Boring” Text](#)).

2. Before Reading: Set Purpose — *Launch*. Setting a purpose before reading declares your destination. If you are going on a journey, having a destination helps in you make decisions along the way. You know where you are headed and what you want to accomplish along the way. The student who took five hours to read twelve pages wanted to get “everything” out of the text. Well, five hours is not nearly enough time to do that. It is like saying I want to explore every rock and gully in the Rocky Mountains. Five hours won’t do it. This is not only an unrealistic purpose, but it is detrimental to accomplishing your long term academic goals. There are many other important reasons to set purposes. [Launch](#) lists useful steps for setting purposes for reading. Closely connected is After Reading: Check Purpose [Met Purpose?](#) because you will want to follow through to be sure you met your purposes for reading.

3. During Reading: Synthesize Along the Way — *Download*. [Synthesizing Along the Way](#) means pulling together the pieces of what you are learning at points during the journey of reading a text. Synthesizing involves explicitly looking for related words, concepts, and ideas in the text and using them to construct a main idea or summary statement. This **during** principle involves stopping after a section of text and noting what you are learning from the reading. You do this quickly, just enough to hold the information until you can think more deeply about it later. [Downloading](#) is a quick way to do this.

4. During Reading: Ask Questions — *Prof's Questions and My Questions*. *Asking Questions* is approaching a text with wonder. Asking genuine questions is more important for learning than having pat answers. Reading with questions in mind is an important part of critical reading; you challenge ideas and demand an understanding of the author's meaning and purpose. As you try to answer your questions, do not be satisfied with shallow answers. Go beyond the text if necessary. Appreciate that the best questions have no ready answers. Some questions take days, years, or centuries to answer while some may never have sure answers but are questions still worth asking and thinking about. Good questions change the world. When you sustain your questions, ponder them, and allow them to give birth to new questions, you are becoming a scholar. Nothing is a more important tool for a scholar than asking good questions.

You have been asking questions since you could talk; it is a natural way of being in the world. Bring that same curiosity to the text.

- Ask questions **before** you read to give purpose for reading—to discover answers you really want to know.
- Ask questions **during** reading to clarify meaning, to probe for understanding, to be metacognitively aware, and to gain new insights.
- Ask questions **after** reading to review, to reflect on the significance of what you have learned, and to generate new thinking.

One strategy for asking questions when you are in the survival mode is [Prof's Questions](#). Beyond that are asking your own questions, Socratic questions, and probing questions for critical and creative thinking, but that is not our purpose for now. Suffice it to say, do not let *Prof's Questions* be your only questions.

5. After Reading: Explain — *Be the Teacher*. *Explaining* is partly retelling but is also providing examples, connecting to information outside of the text, and justifying your outlook on the content. Understanding goes beyond mere knowledge of facts, giving back on tests the official theory of the textbook or professor, or telling someone about it. [Making yourself explain what you understand](#) pushes you to a higher level of comprehension. Explanation involves the following:

1. Knowledge of Why and How:

- Providing knowledgeable and justified accounts of events, actions, and ideas and the reasons or theory behind them
- Verifying knowledge with examples, predictions, support, analogies, or theoretical perspective

2. Warranted Opinions:

- Justifying how you arrived at an answer and why it is right
- Giving valid evidence and argument for a view and being able to defend that view against other views
- Seeing the guiding principles behind the problem, phenomenon, or fact; seeing the principles that clarify and give value to the facts

There are strong reasons for explaining what you are learning. The strategy used to apply this principle is [Be the Teacher](#).

Supporting Academic Reading Strategies

First of all, realize that these strategies are the beginning of academic reading, not the end. They help students come to a basic understanding of the text and help them finish their texts in a timely manner. When they feel capable of finishing their reading assignments with understanding, they are then ready for probing, critical, and analytical scholarly reading. First though, what can you do as a professor to help students take advantage of the benefits of these five basic reading strategies? Here are just a few suggestions:

- Since these strategies come from the expert-reader research and because you are the expert reader in your classroom, *share your own experiences reading the tough texts* in your field.
- When you give a new reading assignment, *suggest one or more of the strategies* you feel will be especially helpful in learning from that text assignment for your learning objective.
- Because having a strong purpose for reading is powerful in guiding one's reading, you can *give students purposes* for reading. The purpose can be as generic as "To learn something fun. To challenge my current perceptions. To prepare to teach others," or it can be as targeted as "Draw the respiratory system from memory and describe in detail the purposes and functions of each part of this system." Students' common purpose, of "To pass the quiz," is useless for focusing and guiding one's reading.
- Challenge students to *come up with their own important purposes* specific to the text and have them share these in class on the due date of the reading. How did they come up with the purposes? How did these purposes help them learn from the text?
- Adapt the *handouts* linked to this tip to your discipline and give students a hard or electronic copy. Introduce it and encourage them to use it. Remind and discuss it after they have had experience trying the strategy with your assigned readings. "What did you try? How did it work for you? Why?"
 - [T.H.I.E.V.V.E.S. with Snatches](#)
 - [Six Ways to Become Fascinated by a "Boring" Text](#)
 - [Launch](#)
 - [Met Purpose?](#)
 - [Why Synthesize Along the Way](#)
 - [Downloading Patterns](#)
 - [Prof's Questions](#)
 - [Why Try to Explain What You Are Learning](#)
 - [Be the Teacher](#)
- Hold a quick *discussion* with students about what constitutes effective approaches to academic reading (supporting yourself **before**, **during**, and **after** reading.).

- Ask several *readers to report* to the class what they've been doing that has helped them successfully read your texts – in terms of rate, basic comprehension, and higher order critical thinking.
- *Hold a contest* for the students who can predict the most questions you give on a quiz or exam.
- Encourage students to *form study groups* and have them share their strategies for reading well in preparation for the study group. Suggest they do “Be the Teacher” during the study group sessions.

Additional Resources:

Adler, M.J. & Van Doren, C. (1972). *How to read a book: The classical guide to intelligent reading*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Flippo, R. F., & Caverly, D. C. (2009). *Handbook of college reading and study strategy research*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge (Taylor & Francis).

Isakson, M. B. with Isakson, R. L., & Windham, I. (2011). *Learn More & Read Faster*. Provo, UT: BYU Publishing.

Isakson, M. B., Gilbert, J. B., Isakson, R. L., & Loud, Z. S. (ms in prep). “How Undergraduates and Professors Read Academic Texts and Implications for Teaching.” You may request a copy of the final report at marne_isakson@byu.edu.

Pressley, M., & Afflerbach, P. (1995). *Verbal protocols of reading: The nature of constructively responsive reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum for a review of 38 expert-reader studies.

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